



At the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

NCOs Walk the

Story and photos by
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The shoes are the first things you notice. The low quarters gleam like fresh-cut obsidian even on overcast days in Washington, D.C. Each step the soldier takes across the 63-foot walkway is a perfect, 30-inch stride, heels clicking with the perfection of metronomes. On the 21st step, the steel-plated shoes come together, cracking like a rifle shot across the nearby graves of Arlington National Cemetery.

After making a series of facing movements, each lasting exactly 21 seconds, the soldier turns and begins another 21-step vigil across the white marble plaza while camera-clicking tourists line up behind a metal barrier.

It is perhaps the infantry's highest-visibility assignment: the 3rd U.S. Inf, commonly known as "The Old Guard." Though guarding the Tomb of the Un-

known Soldier is only one small part of the unit's mission, it is the image of the stoic soldier in crisp dress blues that is lodged most firmly in the public's mind.

As the Army's oldest infantry unit — pre-dating the Constitution by four years — the Old Guard's reputation could easily be a burden or distraction to daily soldiering, but many of its NCOs say they manage their subordinates much as they would in a regular line unit. The main difference is that when they report to work each day, these infantry soldiers step squarely under the public's microscope. Whether guarding the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, escorting the President at official functions or riding in the military's only ceremonial equestrian unit, everything — from the highly-polished shoes to the snow-white gloves — must be not just perfect, but better than perfect.

In the tomb guard dayroom, 25 feet beneath the Arlington Memorial Am-



Walk of Perfection

phitheater, CPL Todd Brunori holds up a pair of low quarters. "I spent two hours on these last night," he says. "With the rest of the uniform, it could take up to six hours to get everything right."

For soldiers new to the tomb guard way of life, those six hours will likely be spent shining shoes, polishing brass and pressing the uniform until the creases are knife-sharp. "Time management is what gets most of the new people," says Brunori, an assistant relief commander for the platoon. "If you don't know what you're doing, it could take all day. Eventually, you get a system down, a master plan."

Such obsession with perfection is what makes the Old Guard tick like clockwork as the Army's foremost ceremonial unit. As the primary cogs in that machinery, Old Guard NCOs apply all the standard infantry troop leading procedures...and then some.

"There's no room for error," says SSG Jeff Roper, first relief commander for the tomb guard. "Everyone here lives and dies by Line Six."

Roper is referring to the sixth line in the Sentinel's Creed: "My standard will remain perfection." Posted beside the door leading from the dayroom to the upper plaza, the creed is the last thing tomb guards see before going up to "walk the walk."

Since 1948, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier has been guarded 24 hours a day, 365 days a year by a soldier from the 3rd U.S. Inf. There are actually four "Unknowns" interred on the plaza

— the remains of servicemen from World Wars I and II, Korea and Vietnam. In a ceremony popular with the cemetery's annual 3.5 million visitors, guard shifts change every hour in the winter, every half hour in the summer. The relief commander — an NCO — comes up from the dayroom with the incoming guard, steps to the center of the plaza, explains the significance of the guard change to the assembled tourists, then proceeds to inspect the soldier

about to assume guard duty. It is the only time many of the tourists will ever see a precise, by-the-book inspection of military personnel and weapons.

As an NCO, Roper knows it's his duty to maintain high standards during the white-glove inspection, even if it means sending the soldier back down to the dayroom to correct a deficiency.

"If, for some reason, you haven't been paying attention to detail before you get assigned here, then you'll have it down pat by the time you leave," Roper says. "In fact, inspecting other soldiers' uniforms is just second nature to me by now."

For the 10-year Army veteran, leading by example is always at the front of his mind, whether it's the way he carries



himself when walking around the day-room or while inspecting soldiers during the changing of the guard. "If I'm inspecting my soldiers carefully, how can I expect them to obey me if I've got wrinkled pants or smudges on my brass? While I'm inspecting them, I know they're also inspecting me."

Once on duty, tomb guards take 21 steps, face the tomb for 21 seconds, make another facing movement for 21 seconds, take another 21 steps to the other side of the plaza, face for 21 seconds then repeat the whole process again. The number 21 represents the highest salute given to dignitaries in military and state ceremonies.

To be a member of the Old Guard, soldiers must meet certain standards — including a minimum height of 5 feet, 8 inches. Recruiters visit basic training companies to find potential candidates and Regimental Command Sergeant Major CSM Michael Bergman says that any qualified infantry soldier is always encouraged to submit a DA Form 4187 to their branch manager. "All of our soldiers are hand-picked," Bergman adds.

Brunori was one of seven soldiers selected from his basic training unit and when the recruiter told him he qualified for the Old Guard, he had only the vaguest notion of what the prestigious regiment was all about. "There's a lot of mystery surrounding us," he says, taking a break between guard shifts at the Tomb of the Unknown. "Before I left basic training, I didn't know a lot about the Old Guard, but I did know it was an honor to be selected. Some of the drill sergeants started giving me a hard time, telling me I'd be polishing doorknobs at the White House, but they didn't really have a good understanding of what the Old Guard is all about. I certainly haven't polished any doorknobs since I've been here."

Instead, the Pennsylvania native found himself assigned to the 1st Presidential Marching Plt, a job which required him to escort the President and visiting dignitaries. "The last time I was at the White House was when Yeltsin was there," he says nonchalantly, as if he's talking about someone he saw at the enlisted club last night instead of the Russian President. During his stay in that platoon, Brunori also participated in President Bush's retirement and Pres-

ident Clinton's inauguration ceremony. "Sure, the first couple times at the White House were mind-blowers," he says, "but eventually it just became part of the job."

Upon arrival at 3rd Inf Headquarters, soldiers like Brunori go through a three-week Regimental Orientation Program which teaches O.G.-wannabes everything they need to know about the unit's standards for uniform preparation, drill and ceremony and manual of

arms. By the time they graduate from ROP (pronounced "rope"), the soldiers have earned the buff-colored strap all Old Guard soldiers wear on their left shoulder.

Those who don't make it through ROP are returned to their previous unit. "If they can't do it and we send them back, it's not that they're bad soldiers," Roper says. "Usually it's the soldier himself who realizes he's just not cut out for the Old Guard."



After ROP, soldiers are assigned to one of nine companies where they receive more in-depth training on their particular responsibilities. After a year, Old Guard soldiers have the opportunity to apply for one of the specialty platoons like tomb guard.

"Normally, NCOs have to have some depth of trust in you before they'll send you out to a specialty platoon," Brunori says.

There are seven specialty units in the 3rd U.S. Inf, including the Commander-in-Chief's Guard, line companies that share ceremonial and field duties, the U.S. Army Drill Team (famous for the silent "front-to-rear overhead rifle toss" complete with fixed bayonets), the Fife and Drum Corps, Salute Gun Battery and Caisson Plt. This last unit — which uses a team of six horses to pull a flag-draped casket on an artillery caisson during funeral processions — is the only one of its kind in the entire military, Bergman says. "Having an equestrian background helps to be a member of this platoon, but soldiers still must learn how to ride in processions." The platoon will likely be remembered best for its escort during President John F. Kennedy's funeral.

Soldiers assigned to the Commander-in-Chief's Guard replicate the original unit assigned to the original commander-in-chief, George Washington. The unit dresses in colonial garb and is organized according to guidelines prescribed by Baron Friedrich Von Steuben. "The challenge to those NCOs is to learn everything they can about colonial history, including how to carry black powder muzzle loaders," Bergman says. "Not only do they have to *look* like colonial soldiers, they have to *act* like colonial soldiers."

To assist with authenticity, the Old Guard has its own uniform and flag shop with clothing ranging from World War I "doughboy" helmets to Revolutionary War British grenadier coats.

Just as Brunori says there tends to be an aura of mystery around the regiment, NCOs like SSG Gary Hardy say their Old Guard assignments are one-of-a-kind. "This is the other side of the Army, the one you never know is there until you actually get in and start doing the job," says the platoon sergeant for Co C.

Since joining the Old Guard four

years ago, Hardy's days have been filled with performing the honor guard for as many as 10 funerals each day where his soldiers pull double duty as both pallbearers and firing party. In his platoon, the daily schedule calls for endless uniform preparation, training sessions and schedule coordination — a routine broken only by the graveside services themselves.

In everything he does, Hardy applies standard leadership principles learned from years in the infantry. "They say the Old Guard is a different kind of Army, but it's not," he says. "We have a mission here and — just like anyone in the 82nd, the 101st or the 25th — we do site recons, pre-combat checks and movements to contact."

Also contrary to popular rumor, Old Guard soldiers *do* go to the field — whether it's training for the expert infantry badge at nearby Virginia installations or a rotation through the Joint Readiness Training Center at Ft. Polk, LA. "We're always pictured as the Army's ceremonial unit, but the tactical side is there, too," Bergman says.

When Old Guard soldiers do have the chance to participate in a field training exercise, they approach the event with as much — if not more — gusto as their infantry counterparts at other posts.

"I see a higher level of concentration and discipline in these soldiers," Roper says. "They're really ready to absorb standard infantry tactics and maneuvers by the time they hit the field."

Similarly, Hardy says NCOs shouldn't worry about their infantry skills going stale while assigned to the Old Guard. "You can leave here and still do your tactical mission."

After serving in other platoons, those who want to become members of the tomb guard must go through the rigorous "new kid on the block" process all over again, learning how to get the 21-step walk down to a science and committing to memory minute details about the 612-acre Arlington National Cemetery. Soldiers are required to know exact locations of more than 140 graves and the stories behind the veterans buried there. At the end of six months, they take a 100-question Badge Test. Passing the exam earns them the coveted silver tomb guard badge worn on the right breast

pocket. After nine months of honorable service at the tomb, badge holders receive permanent orders for the decoration and may then wear the badge for the rest of their military career. Since 1958, less than 400 sentinels have earned this distinction.

In March, SGT Heather Lynn Johnsen became the first woman to earn the badge. Because it's a combat arms unit, the Old Guard didn't allow females into its ranks until 1994 when the 289th Military Police Co was attached to it. Johnsen joined that same year, and in June 1995 she applied for tomb duty.

As Johnsen steps onto the plaza for her inspection on a crisp spring morning, there is only a small reaction from the crowd. With her pinned-up hair, 5-foot, 11-inch frame and stoic expression, Johnsen seems to have successfully integrated the Old Guard.

Because assignment to the tomb guard is voluntary, members can leave any time they wish. Few ever do. Engage Old Guard soldiers in conversation and invariably their speech will be peppered with words like "pride," "honor" and "brotherhood of soldiers."

Knowledge about the cemetery and the tomb is handed down to each new generation of guards like an ancestral legacy. "From day one, you explain the training purpose behind everything," says Brunori. "Tomb guards who worked here years ago will visit, watch us training new soldiers and say *they* said the same things to *their* soldiers. It just keeps getting passed along."

Long before dawn breaks over the Capitol dome to the east and the cemetery's first visitors enter the front gates, sentinels have been at their post, silently pacing in front of the huge marble vault. On the plaza, the atmosphere is hushed, the silence broken only by the whirring of camcorder motors and the relief commander reciting the changing-of-the-guard speech.

Downstairs in the dayroom, there is also an air of quiet contemplation as soldiers make final preparations to their dress blue uniforms and practice the manual of arms with their M-14 rifles. Two monitors mounted near the ceiling record activity on the plaza via security cameras. Relief commanders are also responsible for compiling detailed daily logs which fill ledger books stretching

back decades. Guard quarters are small, as economical as the sentinel walk itself — every available inch of space is taken up with two bunks for resting between shifts, an arms vault, a room for ceremonial wreaths, a pool table (the one recreational luxury) and the ubiquitous mirrors.

With at least six soldiers ready to go out on the plaza at any given time, sentinels may walk as many as five tours each day. Three different reliefs work 24-hour shifts in a fixed schedule. "I can tell you exactly what day I'll be working three years from now — it never changes," says Roper who has worked at the tomb for nearly two years.

To the outsider, the walking guard might look like a mind-numbing exercise in repetition, but to those who actually take the 21 30-inch strides, it is a time for reflecting on those who paid the ultimate sacrifice for the country.

"We're doing this for the Unknowns, not the tourists," Roper says. "Some times I'll look out at all the hundreds of thousands of gravestones and it'll hit me

hard — everybody in this cemetery died defending America. I don't know *how* they died — maybe it was a peaceful death or maybe it was violent and awful — but they all died for the country. I don't think there's anything better I could do in the Army than to protect them now."

Brunori says he concentrates on the 21-counts and his posture while working the plaza. "It takes some endurance, but it's almost like floating on air. So many things go through my mind that I don't really feel my body until I come downstairs and take off the belt. That's when I feel it in my back and legs."

Even though he's always in the eye of the public, Brunori doesn't pay attention to the cameras clicking behind him. "I'm not a tourist attraction for people to take pictures of," he insists. "I'm actually guarding somebody in that tomb."

Once the cemetery closes at 6 p.m., the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier becomes a restricted military area and sentinels switch to a tactical roving guard in BDUs, walking the perimeter while

NCOs train new soldiers on the plaza.

With round-the-clock training and tomb guarding, there is always the danger of burnout, but soldiers claim that unit pride makes most hardships disappear. "Sure, sometimes it seems I have no life of my own, but it's all worth it," Brunori says. "There's nothing like this assignment anywhere else in the Army."

"Certainly, the stress level here can be high," Bergman says. "Our soldiers probably change uniforms more times in a day than any other unit — the mission demand is always there."

But even with that elevated stress, Bergman says the rewards can be tremendous — especially for NCOs. "While they're here at the Old Guard, NCOs learn what level of standards they can achieve. When they leave, they carry their pride and discipline with them. Those feelings stay with them and that, in turn, helps raise the overall standards of the Army." ■

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